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Yurchenko case: A tale of betrayal, fear, love

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"You cannot rule out that this might have been a deliberate ploy."
– Ronald Reagan

NEWS ANALYSIS

Vitaly Yurchenko, the man US officials called the most important Soviet defector in years, is back in the Soviet Union today, facing an uncertain tomorrow.

If he was indeed sent here on a mission to deceive, as President Reagan and several senators have suggested, his redefection has caused maximum embarrassement to the United States, and he might expect a hero's welcome.

Or if the story he presented at his Monday press conference is true – a tale of having been drugged and kidnapped by the CIA – he might expect a promotion.

Neither is likely, however, in the opinion of people familiar with clandestine operations. In all likelihood, the Yurchenko affair will prove to be a tale of betrayal, fear, love, deprivation and redemption played out in the disorienting world of "safe houses" and psychological stress.

Yurchenko was the deputy director of the Soviet intelligence department, or KGB, which oversees espionage in the United States and Canada. As such, he was in a position to know who in North America was working for the Russians.

Last summer in Rome, he showed up at the American Embassy asking for asylum, according to the CIA. He seems to have persuaded the CIA that he was coming over for ideological reasons, that he was disillusioned with the corruption of Soviet society.

But it appears that he was alienated from his wife and family and that he had a girlfriend, the wife of another Soviet official; a clandestine life within a clandestine life. He was middle aged – a year short of 50. He had reached the dangerous age while in a dangerous profession.

There is a pattern among many high defectors, according to author John le Carre, who has written books about defectors. "Many are curiously identical in that they have turbulent sexual backgrounds," le Carre said. It is as if the secret life of backrooms and back alleys leads to a "desperate sexual awakening" and they become "internally destabilized through their own personal problems." This leads them to seek "alien absolutes," such as another country, he said.

Once the deed was done, two things happened to disturb Yurchenko's arcadian dream of total anonymity with his beloved on the other side of the moon. The object of his affection refused to defect with him and, secondly, his case became public in the United States. His interrogators showed him his press clippings, and that seems to have upset him because he thought he was promised anonymity.

Defectors, in their intense loneliness and isolation, often are racked by terrible second thoughts. Often they are in a state emotional turmoil aggravated by a sense of loss. It is during this period that the defector's handlers should reach out to him and win him over.

"It is like having someone totally bereaved on your hands," according to le Carre.

Sources familiar with Soviet defectors say that this is expecially true for Russians, for whom the pull of the homeland by Soviet diplomats by accident with possibly dangerous consequences.

But his story of having been drugged and kidnapped is not plausible.

Intelligence services have their own elaborate etiquette, and although it is not unusual to do all sorts of things to other people, they tend to be quite respectful of each other's agents. You don't drug and kidnap them – because you don't want it done to your own people.

And if Yurchenko was planted to sow seeds of disinformation, then he would not have redefected so soon. It could only cast doubt on his information, it is argued.

If the plant was set up simply to embarrass the United States, the Soviets could not have counted on the incompetence that would allow him to slip away so easily. In the United States defectors are always free to leave – eventually, but not quite so soon.

The story of drugging and kidnapping is particularly strong. They don't realize the force of that pull until cut off from the breast of Mother Russia.

Freedom unsettling

Even for ordinary Russians, freedom itself in a Western country can be unsettling. Whereas before, important decisions were made for them, now they are on their own. The Israelis have noticed this syndrome with Soviet immigrants who are bewildred, frightened and sometimes even angered by the choices that confront them when they come to Israel.

This is magnified to the 10th power when it comes to high-level KGB defectors. They begin to realize how little they want freedom.

Yurchenko's CIA keepers seem to have

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failed badly with the psychological side of his interrogation. If they made him speak English instead of Russian, as he said, it was certainly a mistake.

Perhaps the FBI agents, who were heavily involved because of the domestic implications of what Yurchenko had to offer – the CIA is legally prohibited from investigatory activity within the United States – are not trained in the necessary psychological techniques.

Certainly the decision to bring him to a Washington restaurant on the corner of Dumbarton and Wisconsin with only one keeper and nobody outside watching the street appears to have been clumsy in the extreme. Never mind that he could so easily take the opportunity to slip away as he did. He might have been recognized could have been concocted to buy back his life. Allowing the Soviets to use him to maximum propaganda advantage might have been his only chance for a quiet retirement.

Yurchenko knew about the remarkably similar case of Oleg Bitov, a Soviet literary correspondent who defected and then redefected a year later, in 1984, saying the British had snatched him in Italy and taken him to England unconscious. He knew that Bitov was still alive in Russia.

Recalling a similar story

He may have remembered that the same story had been used for a roundtrip crossing the other way 30 years ago, when the head of West German counter-intelligence, Otto John, defected to the East and then redefected, claiming he had been drugged and kidnapped by the communists. The minister of the interior, Gerhard Schroeder, described the John case as a psychological "short circuit."

Thus Yurchenko may have bought his life and, in the short run, the Soviets would not want to be seen punishing him lest it tarnish their story of an innocent victim of CIA abuse. Nor would they want to discourage other potential redefectors.

But when their next espionage network gets rolled up and they don't know if it was Yurchenko's fault, they may tire of him.

Meanwhile, the intelligence communities in both the United States and ther Soviet Union are desperately trying to figure out what went wrong and how great is the damage. As Sen. William Cohen (R-Maine) said last week: "When you step into the world of mirrors it's very hard to determine reality from reflection."